

Jacobs,

Harriet

Brent

Dyouse, 10c

7/1 2009, 085. 03822



# Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Harriet Brent Jacobs

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



**WHOSE BOOK IS THIS?: AUTHORIAL VERSUS  
EDITORIAL CONTROL OF HARRIET BRENT JACOBS'  
INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL:  
WRITTEN BY HERSELF\***

**Alice A. Deck**

English Department, University of Illinois/Urbana, 608 South Wright Street,  
Urbana, ILL 61801, USA

**Synopsis**—The recent surge of critical interest in autobiography, leads us to rethink all of our assumptions about this genre. In particular, Jeffery Melhman's and Germaine Brée's ideas on the significance of the act of writing to the autobiographer's gradual self-discovery, help us to understand the peculiar questions of authenticity surrounding the nineteenth century American collaborative slave narrative. Following a brief discussion of American abolitionists' rules governing the format and publication of American slave narratives, this article examines some of Harriet Brent Jacobs' letters to Amy Post in which she explains why and how she wrote her life story. It is then argued that the manner in which the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child edited the manuscript for publication produced a text in which *two* narrative voices are then discernible.

The recent surge of critical interest in autobiography has produced some intriguing discussions of the genre such that we can no longer define autobiography as simply a person's life story written by her or himself. Our assumptions about the self (autos) and life (bios) in an autobiography are now called into question, as are those concerning the act of writing (graphien) and shaping a literary text. Jeffery Mehlman (1974) has suggested that autobiography be defined as "the act of becoming alive to oneself through writing" (p. 14), and Germaine Brée elaborated on this as follows:

A writer in French starts his account with 'Je suis né' not, as in English, 'I was born,' an event of the past, over and finished now (an event moreover, that no one can recall), but [literally] 'I am born,' an event that accompanies the act of writing, so that we see the event of the birth and the act of writing mirroring, duplicating and extending one another: a continuous birth into a perpetually renewed and recreated life.<sup>1</sup>

Hence as an autobiographer writes in retrospect, patterns of an earlier behavior usually take on a new significance so that the writer simultaneously achieves a clearer understanding of the "self" and the self's environment. We can expect to detect a growth of a personality, but it is a self-directed growth in that the author/narrator shapes (writes) the story to suit the person she or he has become. James Olney (1978) has even suggested that an autobiographer can become the self created in the process of writing. All of this means that the act of writing and rewriting an autobiography, and of shaping the final version for publication, is an integral part of the self and the life such that understanding the composition process (and the motives for writing in the first place), can greatly influence our reading of a particular autobiography.

These new ideas on the significance of writing to the personal identity being outlined in an autobiography, point up the problems inherent in the Afro-American collaborative or "as-told-to" text in which the writer and the narrator are not one and the same. This type of autobiography raises particular questions of authenticity; not just of factual information about dates, events, and place

\*This is a revised version of a paper discussed at the Feminist Forum, University of Illinois, Urbana, November, 1984. I express my appreciation to Nina Baym for her careful reading and criticism of the first draft.

<sup>1</sup>Germaine Brée is said to have made this statement at a humanities conference in Winston-Salem, North

Carolina, February, 1978. This is cited in James Olney's 1978. *Autos-Bios-Graphien: The Study of Autobiographical Literature*. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 77: 113-123.

THE  
LIBRARY  
OF THE  
MUSEUM OF  
COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY  
AT  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.



names, but the authenticity of the individual sentiments and personal insights contained in the narrative. Historians of Afro-American culture who use collaborative slave narratives in their research can test for accuracy by checking through other types of available documents and records. For them the basic who-what-why-when-where of an individual's life is all that is needed to formulate a broad picture of Southern antebellum life or to pinpoint special characteristics of a certain state. Yet literary critics interested in the art of the slave narrative, and feminists interested in revealing a distinct black female identity contained in the language and style, may question the value of a text that is neither autobiography nor biography, but a hybrid.

In his study *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts* (1982), Albert Stone points out that style and narrative technique in modern collaborative autobiographies are minor matters—*what* has happened in this life is more compelling than *how* it is being communicated or by *whom*: "Drawing attention to the creative self at the typewriter or the tape recorder is often not very important since there are two persons in that situation and neither subject nor scribe is famous in that particular role" (Stone, 1982: 234). One could argue however, that in discussing nineteenth century American collaborative slave narratives it is very important to discuss the two creative selves because several prominent abolitionists, such as Lydia Maria Child and William Still, were also famous as the scribes of slave narratives. Further, we need to try to understand the type of relationship the subject had with the scribe, and how this relationship affected what went into the completed manuscript. If evidence is available we should determine whether there was a mutual trust between the two individuals: who approached whom with the idea of producing such a text in the first place? Did the scribe write the entire manuscript or simply function as a copy editor—correcting the grammar and punctuation? Was the subject consulted about any changes in the manuscript? Is it possible, in reading such a text, to detect two voices narrating the life story, and if so, which moments of personal insight, of personal revelation belong to whom?

Following a brief discussion of the rules governing the writing, editing, and publication of American slave narratives, this essay will address some of these questions in relation to Harriet Brent Jacobs' *Incidents in the*

*Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) which was edited by the ardent abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. Based on information contained in letters Jacobs wrote to Amy Post while she was writing her manuscript, this discussion will examine how the completed text might have been affected by the combination of the author's black feminism and the editor's white abolitionist ideals.

## I

American slaves were prohibited from learning to read and write, yet this only made "book larnin'" that much more desirable. Those few slaves who benefited from a rare act of kindness from their owners, often learned the fundamentals of written English as young children. Both Frederick Douglass in his 1845 *Narrative*, and Harriet Jacobs in her *Incidents* (1861: 1973) recall having been taught in this manner, and both identified this "education" as their first step towards realizing a self identity other than that of slave. Both describe how they continued to teach themselves, gradually acquiring sufficient skill to manipulate their subsequent slave masters, and the slave system, to eventually obtain their freedom.

Most American slave narratives, whether written by the slave or a scribe, were sponsored by northern white abolitionists who in addition to supplying funds, set up the regulations and formulas of the artifact. In *The Intricate Knot* (1972), Jean Fagan Yellin describes this "standard pattern":

'They begin with a portrayal of life under slavery which usually includes facts about food, clothing, shelter, relationships between the master and slave, and information about slavery as an economic system . . . Through a series of incidents, they build to a climactic escape. They end with a portrayal of life in freedom, frequently commenting on racial discrimination and discussing the narrator's work in the anti-slavery movement.'

'The narrator characteristically reveals his inner life: his alienation resulting from his first encounter with brutality, and inevitably, his separation from his mother (often the only functional family for the slave child); his crucial decision to attempt escape; his devising a plan and concealing it from those around him; his fears during his escape; his triumph at his success; and

his response  
(Jean Fagan Yellin)

Another re-  
tive contain a  
ing document  
end of the  
ments, bills  
a reward for  
ceptable as e  
suggests that  
from abolition  
functioned a  
narrative:

'These doc-  
always be-  
former sla-  
less parts  
function is  
former sla-  
are at least  
narrative's  
dence. Ho-  
uments co-  
to a dialo-  
. . . (Rob-  
ert R. R. Wright)

Furthermo-  
tended as p-  
wrong, the a-  
in these text-  
"The abolit-  
They encour-  
stereotypical  
respond to v-  
be" (France-  
slave's drama  
achieve phy-  
slavery, was  
position pro-  
subjugate a s-  
cause. By th-  
successful in  
for the caus-  
the Abolition-  
sistance in e-  
underground  
to get a life s-  
gave in and  
types.

One exam-  
an interview  
Bowery done  
lished in the  
working in t  
fice, Child m-





written by Herself (1861) the ardent abolitionist based on information Jacobs wrote to Amy writing her manuscript, examine how the com- been affected by the hor's black feminism abolitionist ideals.

prohibited from learn- yet this only made uch more desirable. benefited from a rare their owners, often als of written English h Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs in 73) recall having been and both identified eir first step towards y other than that of ow they continued to ally acquiring suffi- ate their subsequent slave system, to even- om.

e narratives, whether a scribe, were spon- e abolitionists who in nds, set up the regu- f the artifact. In *The* Jean Fagan Yellin de- attern":

ortrayal of life under includes facts about er, relationships be- l slave, and informa- an economic system es of incidents, they scape. They end with freedom, frequently l discrimination and or's work in the anti-

racteristically reveals nation resulting from ith brutality, and in- on from his mother ional family for the l decision to attempt plan and concealing him; his fears during h at his success; and

his responses to his new life in freedom. (Jean Fagan Yellin, 1972: 126)

Another requirement was that each narra- tive contain a certain number of authenticat- ing documents placed at the beginning and end of the story. Letters, prefatory state- ments, bills of sale, and posters advertising a reward for the runaway slave, were all ac- ceptable as evidence. Robert Stepto (1979), suggests that these appended documents from abolitionists and slaveholders alike functioned as other "voices" in the slave's narrative:

"These documents - and voices - may not always be smoothly integrated with the former slave's tale, but they are neverthe- less parts of the narrative. Their primary function is, of course, to authenticate the former slave's account; in doing so, they are at least partially responsible for the narrative's acceptance as historical evi- dence. However, in literary terms, the doc- uments collectively create something close to a dialogue—of forms as well as voices . . . (Robert Stepto, 1979: 3-4).

Furthermore, since the narratives were in- tended as propaganda to correct a social wrong, the abolitionists insisted that the self in these texts also conform to a formula: "The abolitionists wanted case histories. They encouraged formula expressions of stereotypical persons who often did not cor- respond to what the narrator felt himself to be" (Frances Foster, 1979: 60). Thus the slave's dramatic description of the struggle to achieve physical self-mastery by escaping slavery, was undermined in the actual com- position process when the slave was forced to subjugate a self image in order to be true to a cause. By the 1840s this pattern had proven successful in selling narratives (raising funds for the cause), and in attracting workers to the Abolitionist movement. Grateful for as- sistance in escaping from the south via the underground railroad, and with no other way to get a life story in print, even literate slaves gave in and produced these narrative stereo- types.

One example of this self-subjugation is in an interview of the fugitive slave Charity Bowery done by Lydia Maria Child and pub- lished in the *Emancipator* in April, 1848. By working in the New York Anti-Slavery Of- fice, Child met and interviewed numerous fu-

gitive slaves.<sup>2</sup> This one is not a full-length, connected narrative like Jacobs' *Incidents*, but Child's prodding questions shape Bow- ery's interview to fit the standard pattern. Charity relates a series of personal tragedies from her past life as a slave in North Caro- lina. She had been allowed to marry and live with the black man of her choice and their sixteen children. After her husband and her kindly mistress died, she was sent to live with an avaricious white woman who sold all of Charity's children. Child interjects several descriptions of Charity in the act of telling her story such as: "Here her voice choked, and the tears began to flow. She wiped them quickly with the corner of her apron . . .," and " . . . The poor creature's voice had grown more and more tremulous, as she pro- ceeded, and was at length stifled with sobs" (John Blassingame, 1977: 263, 265). Thus Child emphasizes the *performance* and the *emotional appeal* of the situation in her com- ments. She chose to summarize rather than transcribe all that Charity had to say about Nat Turner, and did not ask her if Turner's rebellion influenced her decision to run north: " . . . nothing seemed to have excited her imagination as much as the insurrection of Nat Turner . . . It was in fact a sort of Hegira to her mind from which she was prone to date all important events in the his- tory of her limited world" (Lydia Maria Child, 1848: 267). Then the interview ends when Child asks Charity to " . . . give me a specimen of their hymns. In a voice cracked with age, but still retaining considerable sweetness, she sang." One reprint of this in- terview includes four stanzas of the song Charity sang, as well as Child's remark that Charity afterwards spoke with a very "arch expression" about the political significance of the song. This is the only hint in the published interview that Charity might have done more than just weep and mourn her losses in the course of her conversations with

<sup>2</sup>Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880), was one of Ameri- ca's first women intellectuals, abolitionists, and popular novelists. Her carefully researched book *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), is recognized as the first published history of Afro-Americans. This book so shocked Boston literati that sale of Child's novels fell off, and her career as editor of the first American magazine for children, *The Juvenile Miscellany*, ended. In later years, she and her husband David Lee Child were two of the leading mem- bers of the New York Anti-Slavery Society, and co-edit- ed the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* from 1841-1849.





Child, and it suggests that the interview was shaped for publication.

Not only was material possibly omitted; some was never solicited. Charity is not shown *denouncing* slavery, only narrating the personal tragedies she experienced as a slave. The sixty-five year old narrator had been living, and died, as a free woman in the north for many years, but she was asked only to recreate her slave identity while telling her story. Her opinions about herself as a free woman were not sought; her new self was not portrayed. The interview format allowed Child to leave her own voice, replete with editorial comments and leading questions, in the printed text. The fact that Child had the first and last word in Charity's narrative, suggests that she frames the former slave in the stereotype of a pious, hymn-singing, Christian woman who was unjustly treated by an avaricious slave owner. In this guise, Charity was an appealing figure for Child's abolitionist melodrama.

## II

In spite of such authenticating documents as Child's introduction and appended statements from Amy Post and George W. Lowther, the absence of a pronounced stereotype of a black female, distinguishes Jacobs' *Incidents* from many nineteenth century slave narratives. As she states in her preface, her purpose in writing was not to arouse sympathy for herself, but "to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of woman at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I have suffered, and most of them far worse" (Lydia Maria Child, 1848: xiv). Yet the letters Jacobs wrote to Amy Post while she worked on her manuscript show that she gradually attached more and more significance to it as a demonstration of her integrity as a free, literate, black female.

Born around 1815, in Edenton, North Carolina, Jacobs escaped to New York City in 1842. In the north she went to work as a housekeeper for Nathaniel P. Willis, at that time one of the leading members of New York's literati. With its inception in 1846, Willis edited the *The Home Journal* in which he once referred to Jacobs as "our intelligent housekeeper," "our household oracle," in one of his columns; yet he never mentioned that she was at the time a fugitive slave because among his friends, he was known as being

pro-slavery. He admired Jacobs and gave her unlimited access to his personal library. When her former owners tried to reclaim her under the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850, Willis bought her freedom and Jacobs remained in his family as a paid servant for 17 years.<sup>3</sup>

Her letters to Amy Post<sup>4</sup> indicate that Harriet Jacobs eventually became involved in the Anti-Slavery movement and when possible, she travelled to Rochester, New York where her only brother, also a freed slave, used to share the speakers' platform with Frederick Douglass. Through her acquaintances in Rochester she was introduced to Post, a member of the western New York Anti-Slavery Society and a participant in the first Women's Rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. After hearing Harriet Jacobs talk about her experiences as a slave, Post encouraged her to tell her story to Harriet Beecher Stowe whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had just become a best seller. Mrs. Cornelia Willis supported Post's suggestion. Jacobs resisted this idea at first, as is evident in this excerpt from one of her letters to Post:

"Your proposal has been thought over and over again but not without some most painful remembrances. Dear Amy, if it was the life of a heroine with no degradation associated with it. Far better to have been one of the starving poor of Ireland whose bones had to bleach on the highways than to have been a slave with the curse of slavery stamped upon yourself and your children. Your purity of heart and kindly sympathies won me to speak of my children. It is the only words that had passed by lips since I left my (grand)-mother's door. I had determined to let others think as they pleased but my lips should be sealed and no one has a right to question me. For this reason when I first

came North I told the people because they would not consent to give help save another person be selfish and come back. (Dorothy

Jacobs was hesitant to have had an affair with her brother while still living in the north that her two children, would be lauded for their own reputations. Jacobs' commitment to the people prevailed. Amy Post contact Stowe suggested via Post take her daughter on a trip to England there as a "reprisal slave." Mrs. Stowe's Louisa might be patronizing writing to a young woman. Sterling, 1984: 74. The idea of "this class" to the British; however, some of the facts of the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* are autobiographical to verify that the book is based on facts.

Jacobs was full of pride about her work and realize the extent

<sup>3</sup>Lydia M. Child explains Jacobs' background and her relationship to the Willis family in a letter to John Greenleaf Whittier, dated April 4, 1861. See Meltzer (1982: 378-379) and Sterling (1984: 73).

<sup>4</sup>Thirty or more of Harriet Brent Jacobs letters to her friend Amy Post are now part of the Post Family papers at the University of Rochester Library. Selections from these letters, spanning the years 1849-1861, are reprinted in *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* Dorothy Sterling, ed (1984), Norton, New York. Sterling did not correct the grammar and punctuation in Jacobs' letters, and neither do I in my discussion.

<sup>5</sup>In *Incidents* Jacobs writes "the slave woman... the same standard as other people's self, than to submit to anything akin to freedom control over you except and attachment. A man pleases, and you dare not seem so great one who has a wife to of the slave confuses fact, renders the practice Sterling, 1984: 55). Harriet a lover demonstrates slaves who were sexual body and made her overly involved with a white man make her consent to be a "da" claimed authority she did not have the reason and another view Jean Fagan Yellin (198



Jacobs and gave her personal library. I tried to reclaim her law passed in 1850, and Jacobs repaid servant for 17

Post<sup>4</sup> indicate that she became involved in it and when possible, New York City, also a freed slave, her platform with her acquaintances was introduced to the New York Anti-Slavery Convention at Seneca Falls. Harriet Jacobs as a slave, Post's story to Harriet in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had Mrs. Cornelia Wilkes. Jacobs' response is evident in this letter to Post:

I thought over and without some most Dear Amy, if it is with no degradation. Far better to have a poor of Ireland teach on the high ground a slave with the hood upon yourself our purity of heart won me to speak the only words that I left my (grand-) determined to let released but my lips no one has a right to reason when I first

Jacobs' background and family in a letter to John 14, 1861. See Meltzer 184: 73). Jacobs' letters to her the Post Family papers library. Selections from 1849-1861, are reprinted in *Black Women in America*, ed (1984), Norton. I cannot correct the grammar errors, and neither do I in

came North I avoided the Anti-Slavery people because I felt I could not be honest and tell the whole truth . . . I would never consent to give my past life to anyone without giving the whole truth. If it could help save another from my fate it would be selfish and unchristian of me to keep it back. (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 75)

Jacobs was hesitant about revealing that she had had an affair with a young white bachelor while still living in the south,<sup>5</sup> fearful that her two children born of this relationship, would be labeled illegitimate and that her own reputation would be ruined. Yet Jacobs' commitment to helping other black people prevailed and she agreed to let Amy Post contact Stowe on her behalf. She even suggested via Post that Stowe might like to take her daughter Louisa along on her next trip to England to meet the abolitionists there as a "representative of a Southern slave." Mrs. Stowe rejected the idea because Louisa might be subject to "much petting and patronizing which would be more pleasing to a young girl than useful" (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 76). Stowe did not like the idea of "this class of people" being presented to the British; however, she did want to use some of the facts of Jacobs' life as part of her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a collection of autobiographical sketches of slaves intended to verify that the incidents in the novel were based on facts.

Jacobs was furious with Stowe for her remark about her daughter, but it made her realize the extent of American racism. She

<sup>5</sup>In *Incidents* Jacobs justifies her affair as follows: ". . . the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in taking a lover who has not control over you except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to make unhappy . . . the condition of the slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 55). Harriet's act of defiance in choosing a lover demonstrates that unlike thousands of female slaves who were sexually abused, she controlled her own body and made her own decision to become romantically involved with a white male. Her master had tried to make her consent to be his mistress, but Harriet or "Linda" claimed authority over her self in spite of laws saying she did not have the right to do so. For a fuller discussion and another view of this aspect of Jacobs' story see Jean Fagan Yellin (1985).

sarcastically wrote: "Think dear Amy that a visit to Stafford House would spoil me, as Mrs. Stowe thinks petting is more than my race can bear? Well, what a pity we poor blacks can't have the firmness and stability of character that you white people have" (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 77). If at first Jacobs was content to convey her story to a scribe for the sake of helping black people in bondage, Stowe's rejection inspired Jacobs to write her life story herself as a way to prove her own and black people's "firmness of character." In another letter she explained:

'I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself. Don't expect much of me dear Amy. You shall have truth but not talent. God did not give me that gift but he gave me a soul that burns for freedom and a heart nerved with determination to suffer even into death in pursuit of that liberty without which make life an intolerable burden . . . I am aware of my many mistakes and willing to be told of them. Only let me come before the world as I have been, an uneducated and oppressed slave. (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 79)

She is now willing to take any risk to her present personal security by reclaiming her old slave identity, and infusing it with a God given human dignity, rather than apologize for her former condition and anything she might have done at that time. The purple prose in this letter stems from Jacobs' angry defiance of Stowe's racial slur, but a self-confidence emerges here that is lacking in the excerpt from the earlier letter to Post.

No longer self-conscious about niceties of style, Harriet Jacobs proceeded to write her life story at night after the Willis family retired. She never told any of the Willis' that she was writing her autobiography for fear of what Mr. Willis would say about it; thus she had to continue with her normal work load—cooking, cleaning house, and tending the Willis children. All of this hindered her progress with her manuscript, something she complained about in another letter to Amy Post:

Poor Hatty name is so much in demand that I cannot accomplish much. If I could steal away and have two quiet months to myself I would work night and day. To get this time I should have to explain myself, and no one here except Louisa knows that I







have ever written anything to be put into print. I have not the courage to meet the criticism and the ridicule of educated people. The old proverb where there is much given much is required. With myself nothing given and there must be little expected. (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 80)

The educated people she is referring to here are the house guests who came to see the Willis family. She served them their meals but never approached them concerning her manuscript. Jacobs's experience, demonstrates a pattern common to many black American women writers who, as part of the working class, could not afford the luxury of devoting full time to their craft.<sup>6</sup> She eventually understood this as the reason for any deficiencies she had in composition and never expected, in spite of the worthiness of her story, that it would be recognized as a great work of art. Describing her manuscript to Amy she wrote: "Just now the poor Book is in its Chrysalis state and though I can never make it a butterfly I am satisfied to have it creep meekly among some of the humbler bugs." (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 81) Grammatical and stylistic problems aside, Jacobs understood the effectiveness of metaphor as a means of saying one thing and meaning another. The clandestine act of writing her autobiography was the chrysalis state of her gradual awakening into a confidence in herself as an author. Ever mindful of her position as servant in the Willis household, she draws an analogy between herself and her book as humble bugs in the literate world.

When, after many years, Jacobs finally completed the manuscript, she asked Amy Post to write a preface explaining that she had urged Jacobs to write her story. Post complied and sent Jacobs a preface. There is no evidence as yet available to indicate whether Post read Jacobs' manuscript, but we know that she received a letter from Jacobs informing her that she had sent the

manuscript to a Thayer and Eldridge publishing house in Boston. According to Jacobs, this publisher agreed to publish the manuscript if Jacobs could obtain a preface from Lydia Maria Child, as they thought this widely known abolitionist's name on the title page would help sell more books. Jacobs was at first afraid to approach another "satellite of so great a magnitude" after her brush with Stowe. Yet when she finally managed to meet Mrs Child in the Boston Anti-Slavery Office, she found her much more pleasant than Stowe: "Mrs. C is like yourself," she wrote Amy, "a whole souled woman. We found a way to each other's heart. I will send you some of her letters." (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 82) One of Child's letters read as follows:

'Wayland, August 13, 1860

Dear Mrs. Jacobs,

I have been busy with your M.S. ever since I saw you; and have only done one third of it. I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited. The events are interesting and well told; the remarks are also good, and to the purpose. But I am copying a great deal of it, for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining.

I should not take so much pains, if I did not consider the book unusually interesting, and likely to do much service to the Anti-Slavery cause. So you need not feel under great obligations. You know I would go through fire and water to help give a blow to Slavery. I suppose you will want to see the M.S. after I have exercised my bump of mental order upon it; I will send it wherever you direct, a fortnight hence.

My object in writing at this time is to ask you to write what you can recollect of the outrages committed on the colored people, in Nat Turner's time. You say the reader would not believe what you saw 'inflicted on men, women, children, without the slightest ground of suspicion against them.' What were those inflictions? Were any tortured to make them confess? And how? Were any killed? Please write down

<sup>6</sup>Aware that people might doubt her motives and her story's authenticity, Jacobs' asked Post to verify in a Preface that she was working all the while she was trying to get the book out, but not to mention with whom she lived and worked: "I would not want to use the Willis name, neither would I like to have other people think that I was living an Idle life—and had got this book out merely to make money" (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 81).

some of the  
let me have

I think  
Brown, had  
naturally c  
M.S. is alr  
so approp  
your grand  
Mr. Chil  
membered t

Jean Yellin  
of this letter,  
ports Child's  
to *Incidents*  
copy editor in  
publication. F  
and pages goe  
forming a tex  
paragraph for  
mitted agains  
to add elemen  
with the expec  
graph she pro  
as the chapter  
conform. As  
Bowery's com  
details in *Inc*  
dramatic. Ac  
for was not c  
sonally. She  
beaten, nor b  
ishment. But  
about what s  
which Child i  
explained in  
February 4, 1  
into one chap  
ers,' in order  
ping upon hor  
interrupting th  
Holland & M  
#1282). Those  
read through  
chapter, can s  
introspection  
narrative, nor  
to the central  
tion to triumph  
ment and sexu  
The hallmark o



ver and Eldridge pub-  
on. According to Ja-  
agreed to publish the  
could obtain a preface  
ld, as they thought this  
nist's name on the title  
ore books. Jacobs was  
each another "satellite  
e" after her brush with  
nally managed to meet  
n Anti-Slavery Office,  
more pleasant than  
e yourself," she wrote  
woman. We found a  
heart. I will send you  
Dorothy Sterling, 1984:  
ers read as follows:

, 1860

with your M.S. ever  
d have only done one  
very little occasion to  
which is wonderfully  
opportunities for ed-  
o limited. The events  
vell told; the remarks  
o the purpose. But I  
deal of it, for the pur-  
sentences and pages,  
story into continuous  
arks into *appropri-*  
ou will see that this  
uch more clear and

so much pains, if I  
book unusually inter-  
o much service to the  
So you need not feel  
tions. You know I  
re and water to help  
y. I suppose you will  
after I have exercised  
order upon it; I will  
a direct, a fortnight

ing at this time is to  
you can recollect of  
tted on the colored  
r's time. You say the  
eve what you saw 'in-  
en, children, without  
of suspicion against  
ose inflictions? Were  
them confess? And  
? Please write down

some of the most striking particulars, and  
let me have them to insert.

I think the last chapter about John  
Brown, had better be omitted. It does not  
naturally come into your story and the  
M.S. is already too long. Nothing can be  
so appropriate to end with as the death of  
your grandmother.

Mr. Child desires to be respectfully re-  
membered to you.

Very cordially your friend,  
L. Maria Child'  
(Milton Meltzer and  
Patricia Holland, 1982: 357).

Jean Yellin (1985) argues in her discussion  
of this letter, that the first paragraph sup-  
ports Child's contention in her introduction  
to *Incidents* that she functioned only as a  
copy editor in preparing the manuscript for  
publication. However, transposing sentences  
and pages goes beyond copy editing to trans-  
forming a text. Child's request in the third  
paragraph for more details of violence com-  
mitted against slaves shows that she wanted  
to add elements to bring Jacobs' story in line  
with the expected pattern. In the fourth para-  
graph she proposes to delete passages (such  
as the chapter on John Brown) that did not  
conform. As in her handling of Charity  
Bowery's comments, Child deletes historical  
details in *Incidents* and emphasizes the melo-  
dramatic. Actually the violence Child calls  
for was *not* committed against Jacobs per-  
sonally. She was never tied to a stake and  
beaten, nor branded with a hot iron as pun-  
ishment. But she did send Child details  
about what she saw done to other slaves,  
which Child inserted into one chapter. As she  
explained in a letter to Lucy Searle dated  
February 4, 1861, "I put the savage cruelties  
into one chapter entitled 'Neighboring Plant-  
ers,' in order that those who shrink from 'sip-  
ping upon horrors' might omit them, without  
interrupting the thread of the story" (Patricia  
Holland & Milton Meltzer, 1980, card 47,  
#1282). Those who chose not to skip, but  
read through this particularly gruesome  
chapter, can see that it contains none of the  
introspection evident in the other parts of the  
narrative, nor a sequence of events relevant  
to the central character's evolving determina-  
tion to triumph over her physical confine-  
ment and sexual oppression during slavery.  
The hallmark of Jacobs' narrative is her por-

trayal of herself as a resourceful black wom-  
an who beat the slave system by figuratively  
and literally slipping through its "loopholes."<sup>7</sup>  
Hence, Child's inserted digressions are all the  
more glaring.

As noted earlier, Jacobs herself did not  
want to mention the Willis name nor the fact  
that she worked for them. Child carried this  
further by renaming Harriet Jacobs "Linda  
Brent" and using other fictitious names  
throughout the story: "I use fictitious names  
in the book; first, lest the southern family  
who secreted Linda some months should be  
brought into difficulty; secondly, lest some  
of her surviving relations at the South should  
be persecuted; and thirdly, out of delicacy to  
Mrs. Willis, who would not want to have her  
name bandied about in the newspapers  
..." (Milton Meltzer & Patricia Holland,  
1982: 378). Child did write Jacobs another  
letter explaining the contract she drew up  
with Thayer and Eldridge: "I have signed and  
sealed the contract with Thayer and Eld-  
ridge, in my name, and told them to take the  
copyright out in my name. Under the cir-  
cumstances *your* name could not be used you  
know" (Milton Meltzer & Patricia Holland,  
1982: 358-359). All of this was part of the  
standard practice in publishing slave narra-  
tives and understandable in the context of  
nineteenth century laws protecting the rights  
of the slave holders. However, one can see  
that the necessity to fictionalize the names in  
the narrative gives Child the liberty to change  
other parts of the story in the interest of the  
anti-slavery cause.

It is difficult to say exactly how Jacobs'  
reacted to Child's specific revisions of her  
manuscript, but she did express a frustration  
over not being able to get away from the Wil-  
lis household long enough to meet with Mrs.  
Child and discuss the edited manuscript. She  
explained in a November 8, 1860 letter to  
Post, that Mrs. Willis had lost a child during  
its delivery and had to remain bedridden for  
four weeks:

<sup>7</sup>One of the chapters in *Incidents* is titled "Loophole  
of Retreat." For the idea that this is a controlling meta-  
phor of the entire narrative, I am indebted to Valerie  
Ann Smith's "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and  
Ideology in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a  
Slave Girl*," a paper read at the December, 1985 conven-  
tion of the Modern Language Association, Chicago, Il-  
linois.





'For this reason, my dear friend, I could not attend to my own business as I should have done. I know that Mrs. Child will strive to do the best she can, more than I can ever repay, but I ought to have been there that we could have consulted together and compared our views. Although I know hers are superior to mine yet we could have worked her great Ideas and my small ones together.' (Dorothy Sterling, 1984: 83)

Jacobs' sarcastic reference to her own small ideas indicates her confidence in her integrity as a writer, and an unwillingness completely to surrender her manuscript to an editor without being consulted on any changes. The few available letters from Child to Jacobs indicate that she did seek Jacobs' opinion of the manuscript while she worked on it (Milton Miltzer & Patricia Hollands, 1982). Missing are any letters indicating whether Jacobs ever had the chance to meet with Child before the manuscript was published in 1861.

As any writer, but especially a former slave with a mission to help other black women still in bondage, Jacobs was proud and possessive of her manuscript. However, the demands of the slave narrative format dictated the shape into which Jacobs, via Child's editing, had to fit her story. This produces a dialogue of authorial and editorial voices in *Incidents* that resembles a debate between a subjective (insider's) and an objective (outsider's) representation of one black woman's life. Nevertheless, this demonstrates that Jacobs did not sacrifice completely her "self" and "life" in her story in the name of a cause.

## REFERENCES

- Child, Lydia Maria. [1848] 1977. *Charity Bowery*. In Blassingame, John, ed, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Louisiana University Press, Baton Rouge.
- Douglass, Frederick. [1845] 1960. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Benjamin Quarles, ed, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Foster, Frances Smith. 1977. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. Greenwood Press, Boston.
- Holland, Patricia G. and Milton Meltzer, eds. 1980. *The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child 1817-1880*, (Microfiche Edition). Kraus Microform, New York.
- Jacobs, Harriet. [1861] 1973. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, (L. Maria Child, ed). Harcourt Brace, New York.
- Meltzer, Milton and Patricia G. Holland, eds. 1982. *Lydia Maria Child Selected Letters, 1817-1880*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.
- Mehlman, Jeffery. 1974. *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Levi-Strauss*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Olney, James. 1978. Autos-Bios-Graphien: The Study of Autobiographical Literature. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 77: 113-123.
- Stepto, Robert. 1979. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana.
- Sterling, Dorothy, ed. 1984. *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. W. W. Norton, New York.
- Stone, Albert. 1982. *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. 1972. *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature*. New York University Press, New York.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. 1985. Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. In Davis, Charles and Gates, Henry L., Jr., eds, *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford University Press, New York.

